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Strange Duets: Impressarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914 (review)

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STRANGE DUETS: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914. By Kim Marra. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2006.

In *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914*, Kim Marra invites readers into the tumultuous world of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century theatre through an examination of the on-and-off stage relationships between leading ladies and the men who claimed to have fashioned their success. The text is a *pièce de résistance* of intersectional historical scholarship, analyzing the ways race, class, gender, and sexuality both influenced and were influenced by the relationships forged between men and women of the theatre during the wax and wane of Victorian sentiment, the emergence of Darwinian theories on evolution, and the rise of the New Woman. The book treats three iconic and enduring impresario-actress relationships that reflect the social tensions and changes in theatre of the period.

Augustin Daly and Ada Rehan, Charles Frohman and Maude Adams, and David Belasco and Mrs. Leslie Carter are three of the dynamic duos that dominate the “legitimate” American theatre during this period. Marra organizes her study into seven chapters, dedicating one chapter to each impresario’s early career development and dealings with women and a second chapter to their relationship with their primary leading lady. Due to the enormous success of their theatrical collaboration, David Belasco and Mrs. Leslie Carter warrant a third chapter. The case studies are fronted by an introduction in which Marra explains how these impresarios and actresses, “[r]ising up together from lowly ‘racial’ and class origins, . . . compelled intense fascination because of how, as highly visible celebrities, they played out these cultural tensions, both onstage in performance and, often most intensively and intriguingly, behind the scenes in the process of training and rehearsal” (xviii). The study concludes with an Epilogue which reads the legacy of such actress-impresario dealings through the late twentieth century musical hit *The Phantom of the Opera*, demonstrating how such “personal biography merges with wider social history” (259).

Through exhaustingly extensive archival research into primary sources including letters, journals, photographs, reviews, memoirs, and production ephemera, Marra painstakingly constructs a representation of these working and personal relationships that not only provides insight into the business of the professional theatre of the time, but also into the personal lives and loves of the individuals whose lives were inextricably caught up in the public performance of personal identity. Forty archival images reproduced within the text illustrate the fantastic lengths to which these artists spared nothing to create socially

acceptable representations of gender, sexuality, and race while creating opportunities for private lives and identities that often deviated from such norms a great deal. Marra skillfully weaves diverse interests in science, performance, religion, culture, and personal politics into a theatrical history that, like all great works of art, holds a mirror up to the nature of the society it represents while at the same time reflecting the broad interests and concerns of its contemporary audience.

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